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D Business

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CENTERPIECE

The wiz kid

His zany ideas are wired into big business venture

By LAUREN RITCHIE
Business News Writer

Aaron Fechter, modern-day Thomas Edison, snatches up a colander tosses it upside down over his head and snaps on a pair of dark glasses.

He looks pretty weird. He says strange things:

"You can go home tonight and put a colander on your head and look at yourself in the mirror, but I warn you: You will be a colander-head forever," he said.

Those kind of ideas brought Fechter's company, Creative Engineering Inc., $20 million in sales last year.

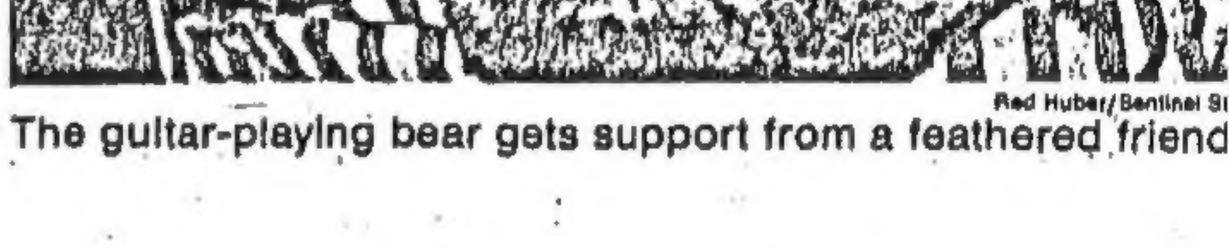
Fechter owns a factory employing 170 Orlandoans. His business: audioanimatronics — the design and manufacture of characters that move in response to electronic impulses programmed through a computer.

Last yea reative Engineering Inc., sold $20 million worth of fire-breathing dragons, talking trees, cheerleading pigs, and hairy drum-playing

Head club.

Nine years ago, Fechter started Creative Engineering Inc. He banged on the doors of those who would listen and of those busy with other things. He wanted them to buy his leaf-eater cleaning mechanism for swimming pools. He always introduced himself as an inventor.

Inventor-page 3-D"



Red Huber/Sentinel St

The guitar-playing bear gets support from a feathered friend

Here's novelty group Central Florida music- and animal-lov may go doubly ape over, inventor Fechter's gorilla band.

They thought I was a harmless kid with a good
," Fechter said."I wanted to make sure they knew I
sn't a salesman right off the bat. I wanted them to
ow that I invented the thing.
Even if they didn't buy it, I got a kick out of show-
them how it works."
he $50 device flopped.
oday, Fechter said, another company is raking in
loot selling mass-produced leaf-eaters that fetch
.95 on the market.
o matter. Aaron Fechter, a boyish executive in
akers and Western shirts, is too busy turning out
ing gorillas and trying to bring about utopia.
is real love is putting those characters together to
n a show "with a message" — a message about
hter's philosophy on energy and utopia.
Everybody told me you can't be an inventor. Nowa-
s things are invented by corporations and not peo-
So I started a corporation to invent things,"
hter said.
he first brainstorm was to be a car.
Gas had just gone up from 35 cents to 50 cents a
on and the car was supposed to be smaller than an
and get 90 miles to the gallon," Fechter said.
was 1975 when Orlandoans on the East-West Ex-
sway first blew by Fechter, who tooled along in a
of deformed golf cart with a 12-horsepower lawn-
ver engine. Fechter got national publicity when he
t the prototype, but he couldn't find anybody to
up the front money to manufacture the car.
But I wanted to keep Creative Engineering alive. I
building leaf-eaters and going door-to-door selling
n the next day. I was still dead broke," Fechter

hen Fechter knocked on the door of opportunity.
t was Paul Czar. He said, 'Oh, so you're an inven-
huh? Don't tell me about inventing. I'm an inven-
" Fechter said. "He never bought a leaf-eater from
But he wanted to know if I could make an elec-
ic control system for a shooting gallery. I said,
, sure, anything."
While building the shooting gallery, Fechter saw a
ing horse that Czar's company had. Soon after-
d, Fechter persuaded his father to lend him $5,000
uild his first character.
This was April 1, appropriately enough, in 1976.
built our first character on speculation and Sky-
't Surplus parts, plus some wires from Radio
ck," Fechter said.
he character, Willie Wabbit, sat around for several
ths before the My / Fun House on Internation-
rive purchased and put it in the Orlando Jetport
advertisement for the tourist attraction. The fun-
use paid $5,000 for Willie — just what it cost to
ild him.
"I was really about ready to quit the business be-
use it was so tough. I thought people would be beat-
g a path to my door and no one did. I made another
aracter, a talking head, and I took it to Six Gun Ter-
ory. They referred to it as "Hot Lips."
Then Fechter, his parents and a talking head set out
,n '69 Buick Skylark for New Orleans where the
embers of the International Association of Amuse-
ent Parks and Attractions were meeting.
"Driving out there, we were making plans for clos-
g down the business. When we got there, we were
nazed at the response. All the haunted houses want-
l him. People with imagination kept coming up to
ir booth saying, 'Can you build this and can you
ild that?' " Fechter said.
They left with $15,000 worth of orders for audioani-
atronic characters.
One of those customers had asked Fechter to build a
lking deer head. After he saw the talking deer head,
e customer ordered $100,000 worth of elves and
eindeer for Santa's Village, a Jefferson, N.H.,
ttraction.
Today Fechter's primary customer is Showbiz Pizza
lace.
The Christmas show for the pizza parlor features a
orilla, a pig, a bear, and several other characters that
ing and play instruments in the Rock-afire Explosion
and.
The character in the band that plays drums, Dook
aRue, pounds on a real set of them — "Expensive
nes, too," Fechter said. Even a crescent moon in the
ackground sings. One small furry critter pops out of
barrel to join in and a spider wearing tennis shoes
n each foot dangles from the sky into the scene.
Fechter also owns an Orlando recording studio
where members of a local band — Clutch — tape the
ongs and dialogue that go with the shows. Bert Wil-
on, better known as Salvadore Alvarez, the leader of
Clutch, is the voice of the gorilla, Fatz.
"Our animation is extremely accurate. The lights,
the mouths, the arms. When the faddism of characters
moving around wears off, we will be the survivors be-
cause we're presenting entertainment," Fechter said.
The characters are pieces of metal connected by hy-
drolic devices that are controlled by electrical im-
pulses. The impulses are produced by a computer that
has been programmed to go with a tape.
Fechter strolls through the factory at 333 Michigan
St. where the characters are assembled, watching the
guitar-playing characters strum in harmony. He calls
nearly every employee by first name.
Fechter can afford to mosey through the plant: The
day to day operations are completely run by comput-
er. Each worker is assigned a different job in the
morning by the computer.
"If you notice, we don't have offices here. Execu-
tives can hide in offices. The plant is run by computer
and we have a few people operating the computer.
Paperwork is forbidden," Fechter said. "If I see some-
one doing paperwork, I ask what he's doing because
that's the first indication that something is wrong."
Greg King and Larry Harmon, minor stockholders in
the company, handle the glitches that the computer
can't, leaving Fechter time to write music and im-
prove on the electrical systems.
Fechter, who graduated from the University of
South Florida with a degree in finance when he was
19, said he learned about electricity by experimenting.
Now, he spends time designing more complicated sys-
tems to fit inside the characters.
The characters are relatively simple pieces of ma-
chinery that Fechter doesn't want described too care-
fully nor photographed too closely.
"We have a few patents and trademarks. But pat-
ents mean disclosing. We feel it's easier to keep a
trade secret," he said.
Fechter sells the characters only to "good homes." If
he thinks that someone is purchasing a character to
dissect it — no sale. Most of the characters cost
$38,000 each. "But you could pick up a tree for about
$20,000," Fechter said.
Inside a converted warehouse at 47 W. Jefferson St.,
work the artists and researchers who fashion the crea-
tures at their nuts and bolts births. In one room, an
elaborate stage sits on the scratched wooden floors.
One tangle of wire and metal waiting to make his de-
but is Uncle Klunk.
"He'll be a human after a fashion. He has a huge,
almost obscene nose, and ears that wiggle. He's a TV

Fechter checks out the talking tree which is part of an elaborate $1 million project.

star after the fashion of Johnny Carson and Merv Grif-
fin," he said.
Uncle Klunk is a character with a talk show. Every-
time the phone rings, he snatches a banana to use as a
receiver.
He'll be part of the Showbiz Pizza Place characters.
"Showbiz gives us a budget and we get to go nuts,"
he said.
Another of the Showbiz characters, Beach Bear, is
about to start a club.
"One night Bert and I were having a brainstorm ses-
sion. He was fiddling with the colander and he just
stuck the colander on his head. It distorted the way he
looks so drastically that we passed it back and forth
and looked at each other and looked in the mirror.
"We realized we had started a club. It's just for fun.
There's no way to do it and be mean. People aren't
wearing them for social occasions yet. It's for normal
people like judges and lawyers who want to vent their
anxiety and join in a little fun — the Colander Head
Club," he said.
"Lately, we've been wearing our colanders around.
Some people are hanging dried broccoli from them.
We were wearing our colanders in Townsends (Fish
House, Tavern & Shellfish Bar) the other night when a
guy who is a Florida linebacker came up to us. He was
indoctrinated right then and there," Fechter said.
Upstairs, in a spacious storeroom, stands a green
fire-breathing dragon and a talking tree with leaves on
the tips of its fingers. They are the beginning of a $1
million project called the Extravaganza of Electroni-
mation Excellence.
Fechter wants to turn the warehouse into a night-
club-museum to house the Extravaganza and show-
case the talents of other artists who work for Creative
Engineering.
"I consider it an important thing to do, although it
may not be profitable. I want this to be a home for
people who want to learn about animation," Fechter
said.
In the basement stands a model of the nine-stage re-
volving Extravaganza that shows the good guy —
dragon Reginald A. Flutesnoot. In the end, he pounds
the bad guys — the ones who are splitting atoms to
get energy.
Reginald is in favor of converting laughter giggled
into a giant ear into electricity. The idea is tell a joke,
light a city.
"We're going to be putting down nuclear energy be-
cause we're very against it. It's a terrible time bomb to
be planning for our children's children to cope with
"The greatest source of energy is still waiting for us
to tap it — the sun. Creative Engineering started off
to be an energy-related company interested in putting
the Arabs out of business. We could tap the sun and
all countries could be energy-independent."
When the show is paid for, Fechter said he'll look to
the future — the home computer market.
"We would like to pioneer and invest large amounts
of money in pioneering a central organized network in
tying home computers together. What that means is a
lot of people are buying computers but not knowing
what to do with them.
"What we want you to do is type in 'waterheater'
and get up a list of who can sell you one or repair one
along with a better business report or a consumers
report.
"That's the beginning of utopia - perfect communi-
cation. That means everybody has access to a massive
data base of information. If you're looking to buy a
home, why should you call a Realtor? Describe your
home in the computer and it will come up," Fechter
said.
Then, Fechter predicts, the labor force will switch to
four-day work weeks, then to three-day weeks with
six-hour days.
"People need more time to spend studying the arts
and doing volunteer work. We should eliminate the
hassle of routine jobs. Very carefully, we should intro-
duce robots to help man do his work. That has to be
done by the right people, who really want to help la-
bor," Fechter said.
"The development of the industrial robot, when
used the right way, will give man the freedom that he
needs. The wonderful part about it is when robots be-
come the moral slave of man, there is no more reason
for man to enslave men. There is no necessity in hold-
ing human beings in a country that don't want to be
there.
"The Great Wall of China will come down," Fechter
said.
He pauses, waiting for a reaction, searching a listen-
er's eyes for belief.
"Really, the Extravaganza is a prediction of that uto-
pia. I don't mean everybody is going to be happy all
the time. But it's a very, very optimistic, idealist feel-
ing. I am practically living for the day when utopia
will come."

THE WIZ KID

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